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ASSESSMENT OF PROBABLE NORTH VIETNAMESE
POLITICAL STRATEGY OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS

1. Hanoi has always given ~~high~~ high priority to the political side of its revolutionary struggle. This has ~~involved~~ involved efforts to organize and stimulate mass opposition to the GVN within South Vietnam, and to maintain popular support at home in the North for a prolonged conflict. On the international scene, it has involved efforts to manipulate world opinion in order to isolate the GVN and to intensify U.S. domestic opposition to the war, and attempts through negotiations to secure a U.S. withdrawal under conditions favoring the disintegration of the GVN.

2. Hanoi has recognized in recent years that its political strategy has been losing its effectiveness in the face of Allied progress in pacification and Vietnamization, and in the absence of demonstrated military success. At the moment, however, there is no sign that Hanoi plans any dramatic shifts or changes in its basic approach on the political side. Current directives in the COSVN

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~~sign that Hanoi plans any dramatic shifts or changes in its basic approach on the political side. Current directives in the GOSV~~ area, for example, are still exhorting the cadre "to motivate the people for a long term continuous struggle", to lay the groundwork for a spontaneous uprising, and generally to accelerate the political struggle movement. Given the admitted failure of the cadre to make much progress in these tasks over the past several years, these current injunctions appear more exhortatory than programatic.

3. On the diplomatic front, there is also no visible ^{indication} ~~clue~~ of any marked shift in Hanoi's strategy. Hanoi has seemed preoccupied with the accelerating Sino-American thaw and is devoting considerable effort to ensuring that both of its major allies -- China and the USSR -- stand firmly behind the war effort. In Paris, there is no indication that the Vietnamese communists are yet ready to make any significant concessions to move the talks forward, although a ^{re}packaging of communist proposals is always possible.

4. Thus, it appears that the Communists are marking time on the political side, waiting perhaps to assess the impact of their military campaigns over the next few months.

5. Hanoi's military actions, in turn, will be aimed at discrediting the Vietnamization program and creating an impression of undiminished Communist capacity for carrying on the war. By discrediting Vietnamization, the Communists would really hope to discredit President Nixon's whole policy on Vietnam; and this they would dearly love to accomplish in 1972, before the U.S. presidential election. Under present circumstances, Hanoi probably sees little ~~chance~~ ^{chance} ~~of a political collapse in Saigon~~ ^{within any reasonable period of time,} or of any negotiation with the ^{producing results} U.S. favorable to Communist interests. Therefore, Hanoi's hopes for overcoming its opponents in Saigon rest to an increasing extent on removal of all U.S. support for South Vietnamese (and Cambodian and Lao) military forces. The Communists would almost certainly see an electoral defeat for President Nixon as the best means of achieving this result. ^{in a climate similar to that now prevailing} The reelection of the President, ~~on the other hand,~~ would face ^{Hanoi} them with a continuation, for several more years at least, of U.S. actions ^{improving the prospects for} aimed at ~~assuring the success of~~ Vietnamization. ^{Hanoi} They would also see the President's reelection as providing four more years for the Saigon government to consolidate its position.

At a minimum, they would like to see the evolution of a political mood in the U.S. that would compel whoever was elected to

6. This is not to say that the North Vietnamese perceive 1972 as a "now or never" situation. Hanoi remains patient, and apparently sanguine concerning its ultimate ability to outlast the U.S. and shatter ARVN's confidence. But Hanoi can hardly be complacent regarding the consequences of yet another year of indifferent Communist performance on the Indochina battlefields. War-weariness is already quite apparent in the North, and defects in the Communist political apparatus in the South are also of great concern. In addition, there now appear to be morale problems in the Indochinese Communist camp arising from the changing Sino-American relationship. Some significant military successes would help Hanoi's leadership in dealing with all of these problems.

7. In sum, the case for doing something substantial in South Vietnam, or Laos, or Cambodia--and sooner rather than later--must be a strong one to the leadership in Hanoi. Successful military efforts in 1972 would at least lift Communist hopes; and depending on the magnitude of the successes, political soft spots in Saigon might be exploited, pacification set back, and Vietnamization discredited. More important, the war issue might be reintroduced into American politics, raising pressures on all candidates for a commitment to complete U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina and opening the way for a variety of Communist

negotiating ploys. Among the tactics that might appeal to Hanoi in such circumstances would be a call for a cease-fire tied closely to ~~some~~ ^{some} prior political concessions for the communists in Saigon.

The North Vietnamese might sweeten such a proposition for the U. S. audience by offering more explicit reassurances regarding prisoner return. The short-term objectives would be to terminate the U. S. military role in South Vietnam and shake the confidence of the GVN leadership.

8. If North Vietnam cannot achieve a degree of success on the military front in the next half year, this does not mean that policy changes in Hanoi are likely. A failure to gain militarily in 1972, however, combined (in the eyes of Hanoi's leaders) with a high probability that President Nixon would be reelected, could conceivably lead to meaningful change in Communist policy. ~~The first hope of the North Vietnamese, of course, is that their present bete noire, President~~ *are probably convinced that a change in the U.S. administration offers them the best prospects of making* ~~Nixon, will be defeated, and that his defeat will make their own ob-~~ *jectives in Indochina more easily attainable.* But if they become convinced that ~~this~~ ^{this} is not going to happen, we should not rule out the possibility that they might try other initiatives. It is possible, for example, that the North Vietnamese, while remaining determined to continue the war, might sometime before the U. S. election reverse field and offer a return

of prisoners for an immediate cessation of any U.S. combat role in the war, in the air as well as on the ground, separating this from any political conditions affecting the Saigon government. Hanoi might calculate that this would be very difficult for the President to refuse during the election campaign, while acceptance of the proposal would enable the Communists to test Vietnamization once again in early 1973 under more favorable circumstances--i. e., without the presence of U.S. airpower.

9. A new Communist initiative of this sort, though not a probability over the next six months, is at least possible. It is out of the question, however, that Hanoi would agree to any overall settlement of the war (except on its own present terms), even if it is unable to achieve some military success in coming months. The weight of all historical precedent, the total lack of evidence of any weakening in the resolve of Hanoi's leaders, and the inflexibility of these leaders who have been waging war throughout their adult lives--all these factors must make any prudent observer conclude that Hanoi, come what may, is likely to persist in the war into 1973 and beyond.